9

Reconceptualizing media literacy for the digital age

Renee Hobbs

Abstract

This chapter identifies how media literacy education must adapt to accommodate the changing nature of young people's experience with digital media and new communication technologies. Teachers who traditionally emphasize the processes of analysing news, advertising and entertainment media must expand their focus to include new media (like cellphones and handheld devices), new message forms (like search engines, instant messaging, blogs and online entertainment) and new social issues (including identity and anonymity, privacy and surveillance). By examining certain conceptual principles and instructional practices which may (or may not) support this shift in focus, this chapter examines the process that teachers will experience as they aim to strengthen students' communication and critical thinking skills as full participants in the digital age.

Introduction

One September morning in a high school just outside Washington DC, Mr Smith, a social studies teacher, started his semester standing at the front of the room full of somewhat sleepy students aged 15–17. The elective course was entitled 'Media Literacy' and, as he passed out the course syllabus, he previewed some of the topics and issues that would be explored over the coming months: analysing news media, learning how news is constructed, and understanding media's function in society; analysing advertising including reflections on the processes of consumer socialization and the manufacture of desire; examining patterns of representation of race, gender and class in mass media messages; and understanding the psychological impact of media violence and the role of entertainment violence in con-

temporary culture. Through a series of readings, screenings, discussion and writing activities, this teacher's aim was to help students to become critical thinkers in responding to media messages, to understand the social, political and economic contexts in which messages are constructed and disseminated, and to reflect upon and examine their own behaviours as consumers and citizens. During the semester-long course, he made active use of newspapers, magazines, television news and entertainment programmes, documentaries and curriculum materials he found online and at the Center for Media Literacy's website in Los Angeles.

While still a novelty in most US public schools, media literacy is now beginning to acquire some status within the K-12 content areas of English language arts, social studies and health education (Hobbs, 2004). As a result of advocacy by educators in the State of Texas, the concept 'viewing and representing' can now be found in American textbooks, for example, where students are led through activities demonstrating the importance of 'reading' a film, documentary or television programme and 'writing' using electronic and digital tools including publishing and presentation software (Odell et al., 2000). In the United States, media literacy is increasingly being used as a means to introduce students to cultural studies, in contrast to more vocationally-oriented programs in media and communications at many high schools, universities and colleges which may emphasize the acquisition of production skills (Potter, 1998). Others view it as an innovative approach to education that synthesizes advances in interpretive and semiotic theory in the specific context of educational practices with children and young people (Buckingham, 2003). After nearly 20 years of work by practitioners and scholars, some topics and issues have emerged as focal points for media literacy: news, advertising, issues of representation and media violence (Considine and Haley, 1999; Thoman, 2001). Key concepts have also emerged (albeit somewhat differentially formulated in Canada, the UK and the USA) that emphasize the constructedness of media messages, an appreciation of both the artistic and the economic function of messages, sensitivity towards the processes involved in the creation of meaning through interpretation, and understanding the ways in which media representations shape our sense of ourselves, our communities, and the world (British Film Institute, 2000).

In this chapter, I suggest some ways that media literacy education must adapt to accommodate the changing nature of young people's experience with digital media and new communication technologies. Teachers who traditionally emphasize the processes of analysing news, advertising and entertainment media should consider expanding their focus to include new media (like the internet, cellphones, videogames and handheld devices), new message forms (like search engines, instant messaging and blogs) and new social and economic issues (including identity and anonymity, privacy and surveillance). In this chapter I focus particularly on the exploration of interpersonal mediated communication as an

arena for reconceptualizing media literacy for the digital age so that it continues to be relevant to the lived experiences of youth in contemporary society.

Adolescent life online

Rapidly changing media create new opportunities and challenges for children and young people. The internet has become the primary communication tool for teens, surpassing even the telephone among some groups. In a 2002 survey of more than 6700 teens and parents, 81% of teens between the ages of 12 and 17 use the internet to e-mail friends or relatives while 70% use it for instant messaging to send instant text messages both from their computer and via wireless devices; 56% of teens aged 18–19 prefer the internet to the telephone. Teens also depend on the internet as an educational resource; 56% of younger teens (12–17) consult online resources for guidance on their homework assignments, while 61% of older teens (18–19 years) turn to the internet for help completing their schoolwork. More than one-quarter (26%) of younger teens go online to access news and information about current events while 61% of older teens do the same (Pastore, 2002). Stern (2005, 55) writes, 'It should come as little surprise to us that the Internet is so seamlessly interwoven into most teenagers' lives that it is difficult for them to pinpoint the role it plays.'

As Marshall McLuhan has suggested, for many young people, schools are now much more impoverished in terms of access to information than the home environment (1964). At the turn of the 21st century, we see another kind of digital divide opening up, in addition to the well known and significant digital divide that results from limited access to technology among youth living in poverty. This new divide is between what children are doing with computers and with new media outside school and what they're doing inside school (Buckingham, 2004). My own two teenagers, ages 16 and 17, are chatting online, playing online games, writing and reading blogs created by themselves and their friends, downloading and listening to music, seeking out information on the internet about hobbies and enthusiasms, and reading web comics. Most of the time, when seated at the computer, they are doing three or four of these activities at the same time, often while supposedly writing a paper for English class.

The significant gap between young people's experience of new media outside school and what they're doing in school means that students in contemporary society continue to encounter the challenges of online media and mediated social communication without the benefit of the support, sharing and insights of caring, knowledgeable adults (Buckingham, 2004). Such experiences may heighten the perception that adults are disconnected and unavailable when it comes to digital media and their shifting and increasingly complex social roles in the lives of young people.

Arising from recent scholarship on fan communities, some scholars are exploring how media literacy skills connect to videogames. At the college level, Jenkins developed a simulation 'games workshop' that involves teams of students creating a proposal for a videogame adapted from a pre-existing popular media text, aiming to strengthen students' communication and collaborative skills, gain an understanding of the basic processes and issues involved in game design and planning, and appreciating the process of adaptation from one medium to another (Jenkins, 2005). Others have used media literacy concepts in approaching the study of historical videogames through educational activities that allow young people to learn more about the roles involved in videogame production, the process of game development and the work environments of the videogame industry. In these activities, students also examined how realism and historical accuracy are manipulated in games to see how stereotypes and mythic elements are used (Squire, 2005). Such work underlines the importance of building learning experiences that enable students to critically analyse and reflect upon their actual day-to-day media consumption experiences and to examine the constructedness of media messages. Let us turn to consider how media literacy education might be expanded to address the changing nature of mediated interpersonal communication, enabling high school teachers like Mr. Smith to incorporate an exploration of digital relationships in his media literacy class.

Critically analysing digital relationships

Scholarship on the communicative dimensions of online behaviour has grown tremendously in the past ten years (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002), but educators and scholars are only just beginning to develop instructional approaches that encourage reflective, critical examination of the complex positive and negative ways that digital media shape and structure interpersonal behaviour. In this section, I consider the emerging literature on adolescents' use of instant messaging (IM), blogs and chat rooms and show how these practices may help extend and magnify concepts central to media literacy education.

Identity development

Media play an important role in how adolescents construct their own configurations of social identity (Fisherkeller, 2002). Young people themselves recognize some of the positive social dimensions of life online even while they are aware that their parents and teachers have concerns about these experiences and relationships. The constant contact that is enabled by IM/chat means that teens can feel 'in touch' with their peers while at home. It is common for teens to carry on multiple interpersonal conversations simultaneously online and the fact that none of these conversations

is very deep is perceived as an asset – small talk and the creative exchange of ideas creates a comfortable, low-pressure social experience (Stern, 2005). Young people may also experience more intimate interpersonal exchanges that can progress from small talk to genuine dialogue on issues of importance. Often, this more intimate and personal communication occurs through e-mail exchanges – teens may feel they can focus more on constructing and developing a message and get a sense that their message will receive the more undivided attention of their friends. By contrast, IM/chat is perceived as a medium of social small talk as only one of many online activities being undertaken simultaneously.

Interactive online communication satisfies two major needs for adolescent development: maintaining friendships and belonging to peer groups. In the social world of adolescence where one must look, dress and act a certain way to be accepted by peers, many teens appreciate the chance to communicate their identity only through words. For some teens, online mediated communication is a primary way to satisfy their need to belong to a social group. Online and offline, peer communication provides teens with the opportunity to learn a host of social lessons about power, co-operation and competition, trust, intimacy and respect. In the busy lives of adolescents who are trying to manage academics, sports, social activities, and family life, it seems teens are simply taking advantage of internet technologies to meet their essential developmental needs to communicate with others in order to learn about themselves (Stern, 2005).

The opportunities for socialization afforded by the internet can support the development of interpersonal communication skills, enabling otherwise shy, unpopular children or those with disabilities to form friendships with others (Hasselbring and Glaser, 2000). In a study of adolescents aged 13–19, researchers found that 18% of teens used the internet to seek help when they felt very upset, sad, stressed or angry. The most common reasons for seeking help included romantic problems and problems with friendships. Family problems and academic/school problems were less frequently mentioned as issues addressed via internet help (Gould et al., 2002).

In order to increase the perceived relevance of his media literacy class, educators like Mr Smith should consider introducing concepts and instructional strategies building upon basic concepts in interpersonal communication in order to explore aspects of online communication as they relate to relationships and identity development. The USA National Communication Association has developed instructional standards for teaching speaking, listening and media literacy that provides a framework for introducing such ideas (National Communication Association, 2003). Mr Smith's media literacy class might explore concepts such as feedback, self-disclosure, reciprocity, confirmation and disconfirmation, inclusion, control and affection. These concepts which are central to the study of interpersonal communication could meaningfully be introduced to students in

order to promote reflection and dialogue on the ways in which e-mail and IM/chat experiences are similar and different from face-to-face interaction. They also connect to the media literacy concepts centred on exploring the relationship between the author and the audience. Students might keep a journal reflecting on their online communication, develop extemporaneous role plays, write scripts to demonstrate their understanding of these ideas, or develop an oral presentation that explains concepts to others.

Blogs and literacy learning

More and more teens are making use of weblogs, or 'blogs'. Blogs are personal journals made up of chronological entries, not unlike a paper diary. The features of a blog include instant publishing of text or graphics to the web without sophisticated technical knowledge, ways for people to read and provide feedback to various blog posts, and hyperlinks to other bloggers. Adolescents make up a large part of the community of bloggers (Huffaker, 2004), but only a tiny fraction of teachers have yet begun to incorporate blogs as a tool for language and literacy education. One interesting example comes from the work of a teacher at Hunterdon High School in New Jersey who uses weblogs in his Journalism 2 class. On his class website, Will Richardson carries on an online conversation with students, encourages them to maintain blogs, to publish and respond to each other's work, and even uses the interactivity and recursiveness of the weblog to support the development of students' editing skills (Richardson, 2005). Blogs can support the development of critical analysis skills, as students ask questions about authors' motives and purposes or examine the rhetorical and visual construction techniques which may be used to make a blog attractive or enhance its readability.

As literacy scholars and educators continue to experiment with this new medium, we can expect to see a growth in the development of theory that examines the benefits and drawbacks associated with the interactivity and immediate gratification provided by new digital publishing tools like weblogs. But, at the present time, many school blogs seem intensely teacher-centred and do not show clear evidence of genuine student investment in online communication. Many school blogs 'typically present themselves as earnest attempts to meld new technology use, student interest, and school work in ways that risk "killing" the medium by reducing its potential scope and vitality to menial school tasks in which students seemingly lack any genuine purpose' (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003: 16). Without authentic problems and questions to investigate, blogs used in the classroom may be just another technology toy. But, because weblogs can function as a kind of diary of one's own process of learning, reflection and growth, they may be able to document (to self and others) the processes involved in building knowledge struc-

tures and encourage the kind of meta-analytic thinking that media literacy educators emphasize.

Dependence and addiction

Little is known about the impact of frequent online communication on human development. Rapid increases in adolescents' online behaviour plus the dynamic environment of the internet make it difficult to document the diversity of encounters that young people are actually experiencing in their social interactions online. In research conducted with 208 11–13-year-old students in a private school in North Carolina in 2004, IM/chat use was measured through an anonymous online survey, with 31% of students reporting 1–3 hours of IM/chat weekly, 26% spending four to seven hours weekly, and 10% using it for more than eight hours per week. 81% of students said IM/chat use was 'somewhat addicting' or 'very addicting'.

Some teachers, ever fearful of new media, may either ignore this issue completely or tackle this topic with too much gusto and inadvertently silence student response. But instructional strategies that relate the concept of media addiction/dependence to online social communication may be effective in increasing young people's metacognitive skills in reflecting upon their own behaviour that results from the media choices in the online environment. For example, students may consider IM/chat use in relation to the seven criteria for dependence identified by the therapeutic community: tolerance; withdrawal; using larger amounts or over a longer period than was intended; unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control usage; a great deal of time spent in usage; social, occupational or recreational activities curtailed by usage; and continuing use in spite of negative effects (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Students might keep a journal or take a survey to reflect on their own dependence on online communication or stage a mock debate concerning whether IM/chat creates dependence or addiction, gathering evidence to develop arguments based on these seven criteria. This approach would be consistent with the paradigm used by media literacy educators, based on the work of Paulo Freire, which emphasizes the cycle of awareness, analysis, reflection and action that encourages students to reflect on their personal media use choices and habits as a key step in awareness-building.

Harassment and online strangers

More than any other topic, educators and parents are concerned about cyberbullying, online strangers and the grooming of young people for work in the online or real-world sex trade. By early adolescence, in both online and face-to-face experiences, young people are engaging in and encountering social interactions with

peers that sometimes feature raunchy language, gossip and harassment. This behaviour generally begins in late elementary grades and peaks in middle school. In a study of North Carolina middle-schoolers, 46% of students have received messages containing profanity and 16% messages that they considered 'threatening or harassing.' Males were nearly twice as likely to have received these kinds of messages as females (11% versus 20%, respectively). Seventh and eighth graders were at least twice as likely to receive 'threatening or harassing' messages compared to sixth graders (Todd, 2005). A survey conducted by the National Children's Home in the UK reported that of 856 children and adolescents (aged 11–19) surveyed, 4% had been the victims of electronic mail bullying and 7% reported being the victim of chat room bullying. Text messaging via cellphones was the most commonly used method of electronic bullying, with 16% of students reporting being victimized through this method (BBC, 2002).

Despite the plethora of news reports about the dangers of such behaviour, children and adolescents continue to communicate with strangers online. In a survey of 213 11–16 year-olds, 74% of participants reported contact with a stranger via e-mail or a chat room, and 25% of these students admitted that they shared identifying information about themselves with these strangers (Stahl and Fritz, 2002). While parents and teachers often react in horror when they learn about online harassment and communicating with strangers, most young people are well aware of the wide range of negative communication behaviour that can occur in interpersonal behaviour online. The thrill of presenting oneself to a stranger (and the power dynamic that is activated by such anonymity) invites opportunities for fantasy and role-playing that young people may use to experiment with their developing social and sexual identities.

There are a number of existing curricular materials that help teachers and parents introduce basic concepts of online safety to children. For example, the 'I-safe America' programme has created curriculum materials for K-12 students with informational mini-lectures, often introduced by law enforcement personnel in a local community, to show children how to recognize dangers and danger signs in online communication. Students are told how to respond assertively to a variety of dangerous situations, learn how to report online incidents and are told that activities in chat rooms are not anonymous and do result in tangible, real-world consequences. Students learn how to understand the techniques used by cyber-predators to contact, communicate, entice and lure, entrap and exploit victims (I-Safe America, 2004).

Beyond such informational efforts, media literacy educators like Mr Smith may want to promote critical thinking skills about online communication by introducing students to some basic psychological concepts that may enable young people to reflect upon, discuss and understand the patterns of social power that are embedded in their online social relationships. Much online communication is altered

by *disinhibition* effects, the tendency of people to say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world (Suler, 2004). For online communicators, the lack of social context cues (normally obtained from the time, place and physical location of an interaction and by the non-verbal and visual cues from others) may obscure the boundaries that would generally separate acceptable and unacceptable forms of behaviour. In addition, IM/chat users perceive that they are alone and may presume other users are also alone, which may release users from the social expectations incurred in group interaction. Educators like Mr. Smith may consider using dramatic activities and role-playing to introduce the concepts of anonymity, invisibility and surveillance and discuss the role of disinhibition in students' experiences with online communication.

Conclusion

Media literacy educators generally encourage reflective examination of one's own communication behaviours as part of the process of developing critical analysis skills, even though this generally has focused on media consumption behaviours. More emphasis on incorporating concepts from interpersonal communication would ensure that media literacy stays relevant to young people's lived experience with digital media. From the point of view of educators, the primary challenge associated with reconceptualizing media literacy in a digital age comes from the atomization and overspecialization now endemic in the academic world, which has long separated scholarship in technology and media from studies of social interaction and human relationships.   Practitioners and scholars in these areas need continued opportunities for collaboration in order to promote the cross-fertilization of ideas that will enable educators like Mr Smith to empower his students with critical thinking skills in responding to life online.

References

American Psychiatric Association (1994) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Vol. IV) Washington DC, American Psychiatric Association.

British Broadcasting Corporation (2002, April 15), Youngsters Targeted by Digital Bullying, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1929944.stm.

British Film Institute (2000) *Moving Images in the Classroom*, London, British Film Institute.

Buckingham, D. (2003) *Media Education: literacy, learning, and contemporary culture*, Cambridge, Polity.

Buckingham, D. (2004), The Other Teachers: how do children learn from TV and other media? Paper presented at the *Beyond the Blackboard Conference*, Robinson College, Cambridge UK, 3–4 November.

Considine, D., and Haley, G. (1999) *Visual Messages: integrating imagery into instruc-tion*, 2nd edn, Englewood CO, Teacher Ideas Press.

Fisherkeller, J. (2002) Growing up with Television: everyday learning among young adolescents, Philadelphia PA, Temple University Press.

Gould, M., Munfakh, J., Lunbell, K., Kleinman, M., and Parker, S. (2002), Seeking Help from the Internet During Adolescence, *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, **41**, 1182–9.

Hasselbring, T. G., and Glaser, C. (2000), Use of Computer Technology to Help Students with Special Needs, *Future of Children: Children and Computer Technology*, **10** (2), 102–2.

Hobbs, R. (2004), A Review of School-based Initiatives in Media Literacy, *American Behavioral Scientist*, **48** (1), 48–59.

Huffaker, D. (2004), The Educated Blogger: using weblogs to promote literacy in the classroom, *First Monday*, **9** (6), http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue9_6/huffaker/index.html.

I-Safe America (2004), *I-safe America*, www.isafe.org/

Jenkins, H. (2005), The MIT Games Literacy Workshop, *Journal of Media Literacy*, **52** (1–2), 37–40.

Lankshear, C., and Knobel, M. (2003), Do-it-yourself Broadcasting: writing weblogs in a knowledge society, Paper presented at the 84th American Educational Research Association, 21–25 April, Chicago IL.

Lievrouw, L. A., and Livingstone, S. M. (2002) *Handbook of New Media: social shaping and consequences of ICTs*, Thousand Oaks CA, Sage.

McLuhan, M. (1964) *Understanding Media: the extensions of man*, 1st edn, New York NY, McGraw-Hill.

National Communication Association (2003) *Creating Competent Communicators: activities for teaching speaking, listening, and media literacy in K-6 classrooms*, Scottsdale AZ, Holcomb Hathaway..

Odell, L., Vacca, R., Hobbs, R., Irvin, J., and Warriner, J. (2000) *Elements of Language*, Austin TX, Holt Rinehart Winston.

Pastore, M. (2002), Internet Key to Communication among Youth, *Click Z Stats Demographics*, www.clickz.com/stats/sectors/demographics/article.php/5901_961881.

Potter, W. J. (1998) *Media Literacy*, Thousand Oaks CA, Sage.

Richardson, W. (2005), *Welcome to Journalism 2*, Hunterdon County High School, http://central.hcrhs.k12.nj.us/journ2/discuss/msgReader$2.

Squire, K. D. (2005), Toward a media literacy for games, *Journal of Media Literacy*, **52** (1–2), 9–15.

Stahl, C. and Fritz, N. (2002), Internet Safety: adolescents, self report, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, **31** (1), 7–10.

Stern, S. (2005), Growing Up Online, *Journal of Media Literacy*, **52** (1–2), 55-8.

Suler, J. (2004) The Online Disinhibition Effect, *Cyberpsychology and Behavior*, **7**, 321–6.

Thoman, E. (2001) *Skills and Strategies for Media Education*, Los Angeles CA, Center for Media Literacy.

Todd, J. (2005) The Benefits and Risks Associated with Teen Instant Message/Chat, Cary Academy, Durham NC, http://web1.caryacademy.org/technology/Newsletter/2004-2005/Jan/im_chat_final_web.htm.